Michael Sherrard and the ghost of James Hanratty

Michael Sherrard had a long career as a barrister, QC and recorder, but his name will be forever linked with that of James Hanratty and one of the most notorious murders in British criminal history.

An official photograph of James Hanratty who was convicted of the A6 Murder. Hanratty was widely and erroneously believed to have been innocent.

Although he died on October 30, Michael Sherrard's obituary appeared in the *Sunday Telegraph* only at the beginning of this month, (hard copy, Monday, December 3). A fairly distinguished advocate, he will be remembered principally for a case he took early on in his career, one that resulted in his client's execution.

Murders happen every day, but for various reasons, some attract far more notoriety than others. The A6 Murder was one such case. Unlike the White House Farm Murders, which involved the slaughter of an entire family by one of their own, or the Soham Murders – of two young girls, the A6 Murder involved the slaying only of one man, but it was a crime of such callousness that it beggared belief. Added to that there was a fairly lengthy and controversial police investigation followed by the controversy over the verdict, all the more so as James Hanratty was hanged in short order, unlike in the United States where a convicted murderer can languish for years on death row before he is finally executed, or not.

On August 22, 1961, the government scientist Michael Gregsten and his workmate Valerie Storie were sitting in Gregsten's car in a corn field, canoodling. Gregsten, a married man, was some fourteen years older than his companion, and forty years later Miss Storie would tell a TV documentary that he was both her first real love, and her last. The reason why will shortly become apparent.

Their idyll was interrupted by a man who shoved a gun through the car window and told them to drive. He said a lot of other things too, many of which were certainly untrue, but his monologue imparted enough information to Miss Storie for the police to identify the probable suspect, and later she identified him positively. We have only the word of Valerie Storie for what happened next, but there is no reason to take issue with the substance of what she said.

Gregsten did as he was told, and they drove for several hours, but at some point the gunman decided he wanted to sleep, and said he would tie them up.

Instead he shot Gregsten in the head, then raped Miss Storie, robbed her, and before driving off in Gregsten's car, emptied his gun into her leaving her for dead lying next to the body of her lover. Incredibly she survived. She was found the next morning by an agricultural worker named Sidney Burton, who heard her groaning. At 6.35am, Oxford undergraduate John Kerr came to the scene. Kerr, who was working on a traffic census, was brought by Burton. Probably thinking she would not survive, he obtained all the details from the injured woman he could, which he wrote down and gave to the police, who were soon all over the crime scene. A massive hunt was launched for a man who was clearly capable of anything.

While Britain's police have rightly come in for heavy criticism down to the present day, the A6 Murder investigation proved that when they set their minds to it they can do an exemplary job, even when all manner of red herrings are thrown in their path. And here, there was a very big one.

The stolen car was soon tracked down, and the murder weapon was found under a seat on the top deck of a London bus. On September 11, 1961, two empty cartridges from that weapon were found in a basement room at the Vienna hotel, Maida Vale. Hotel is probably a strong word for this establishment.

Hanratty had stayed at the Vienna, so had Peter Alphon; both had used aliases. The police were led initially to believe that the cartridges had been found in the room Alphon had used, and the man in charge of the case, Detective Superintendent Basil Acott, thought he had his man.

According to the *Times* of September 23, 1961, Peter Louis Alphon was born at Croydon on August 30, 1930, and was apparently a bit of an oddball. The police took the then unusual step of naming him as a suspect, and were probably surprised when he walked into New Scotland Yard. Basil Acott (known as Bob Acott) arranged an ID parade confident that Miss Storie would pick him out. She was still very weak from her terrible ordeal, and the parade was carried out at her bedside. She picked out a control.

Where a lesser man would have fitted Alphon up anyway, Acott, to his credit, went back over the evidence and eliminated him from the investigation. Although she survived, Valerie Storie was paralysed for life and was confined to a wheelchair for the rest of her life.

Having eliminated Alphon, Hanratty was soon identified primarily from things he had told Valerie Storie. He turned out to be some six years younger than Alphon, and a hardened recidivist of working class stock, "the best type of the working class" according to the House Of Commons debate opened by Fenner Brockway on August 2, 1963.

Hanratty left the country for Ireland but was arrested at Blackpool on his return. He was picked out in a second ID parade by Miss Storie and stood trial at Bedford Assizes in what was then the longest murder trial in English criminal history. It opened January 22, 1962; Hanratty was tried only for the murder of Michael Gregsten. The jury returned February 17 at 9.10pm after deliberating for nearly 10 hours.

Michael Sherrard had believed in Hanratty's innocence, but his client didn't help his case by changing his alibi in mid-trial – something that is no longer permitted in English courtrooms. He was convicted and sentenced to death. After losing an appeal, he was hanged at Bedford Prison on April 4, 1962. He went to his death protesting his innocence, and his family vowed to fight on to clear his name, which they have done to this day.

In spite of the controversy surrounding his conviction, the case against James Hanratty was a lot stronger than many would have had the public believe at the time. Indeed, much of this controversy was manufactured by two men acting independently of each other. One was a failed lawyer named Jean Justice; the other was Paul Foot, the champagne socialist and so-called campaigning journalist who among his other sins contributed to *Private Eye* and edited *Socialist Worker* – worker indeed. No sooner had Hanratty been hanged than Jean Justice began stirring things up.

Justice was born at Dublin, Ireland on October 6, 1930, the son of a Belgian diplomat. Together with his homosexual lover, the barrister Jeremy Fox, he set about sewing seeds of doubt in the public's mind, but not in the minds of the police. Among other things he bribed Peter Alphon to confess to the A6 Murder repeatedly, formed the A6 Committee and published a scurrilous book beyond the reach of England's libel laws. This campaign was supported by John Lennon among others. An official view of Jean Justice can be found at Kew in file TS58/1070:

he is we believe a lawyer of Belgian extraction. He has been described as "disreputable" and "unscrupulous". He interested himself in the Hanratty case during the trial and lived with Alphon for a period apparently with the object of getting him to confess to the murder:

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To its credit, the Criminal Cases Review Commission decided to take on the case. No one was happier than Hanratty's brother Michael, who had seen their father, James Hanratty Senior, go to his grave protesting his son's innocence. Michael said it was like winning the lottery. That euphoria was not to last long. DNA tests were commissioned from the family – samples were given gladly – and Hanratty's body was exhumed. Surprise, surprise, the DNA of James Hanratty was identical to that of the semen in Valerie Storie's knickers. Case closed, or it should have been. Alas, there is no convincing some people.

On May 4, 2002, the Lord Chief Justice handed down a 215 paragraph dismissal of James Hanratty's posthumous appeal. Where before Michael Hanratty had likened the referral by the CCRC to winning the lottery, now he was talking about the DNA evidence being contaminated. Comrade Foot likened the case to the Irish cases of the 1970s and 80s, which had seen the conviction of a large number of suspects on terrorist charges – including mass murder – on dubious and at times plainly fabricated evidence. The evidence against Hanratty had been bent to fit, he said. The irony is of course that Foot and his gang bend evidence to fit their ideology, always have done and probably always will. An unrepentant Paul Foot died in July 2004.

Shortly after the Court Of Appeal hearing, the BBC broadcast a documentary about the case. This programme is no longer available, but there is a transcript. In spite of the DNA evidence, Michael Sherrard seemed unconvinced, but later that year he finally faced up to the truth and said that though he still had reservations about the way the police had dealt with the case, he no longer had any reservations about the verdict.

By far the weakest contribution to this programme came from Tamsin Allen, one of the lawyers acting for the Hanratty family. She said: "It almost looks as though they're casting around for the next available person. Having found cartridge cases in the hotel they're rather stuck with the hotel. It doesn't fill you with confidence that this is a proper inquiry and a thorough investigation."

On the contrary, it shows instead that Detective Superintendent Acott in particular was prepared to admit that he had been wrongfooted, so instead of sticking dogmatically to his first suspect, he asked the question, if Peter Alphon did not leave the bullets at the Vienna, who did? There were only two other people who could reasonably have been responsible, one was a man from India – who could be ruled out, the other was J. Ryan, alias James Hanratty.

The last word on this case though belongs not to Tamsin Allen or Michael Sherrard but to Anthony, the son of Michael Gregsten, who was not quite two years old when a psychopathic small time wannabe gangster murdered his father and shattered so many lives. In the aforementioned BBC documentary he said with unconcealed bitterness:

"I can remember him as being very warm with a, with a soft voice, but of course I was very small, but I suppose over the years I asked my mother very many questions about him, so I have built up a picture. What he was like? Well he was very young when he died."

He added (quoted verbatim from the transcript):

"If you were to ask a perfect stranger who, who was murdered in the A6 murder they think for a minute and they say 'Hanratty'. [?]

In the public eye Hanratty is now per, perceived as being guilty, so I feel I can lay my father's ghost to rest, in a manner of speaking."

[The above op-ed was published originally December 9, 2012. Valerie Storie died in August 2016; this article has been amended accordingly. Here is an obituary. Peter Alphon can be seen confessing to the A6 Murder in this video.]